FREE & OPEN SOFTWARE FOR ALL

BY KUNAL MEHTA

The way in which we view the world is increasingly being dominated by technology. If we want to go somewhere, we use a map application. If we want to eat somewhere, we use a review website to find the best nearby restaurants. The world we see today is through the lens of our technology.

Much of the technology we use is controlled by for-profit corporations. And while those corporations might genuinely want to improve our lives for the better, the way they distort our view of the world is often abusive and exploitative. They lock you into using their services instead of a competitors, shut down services at a whim, or practice negligent security practices so your private information is exposed for criminals to see.

There is hope though, and Dr. Benjamin Mako Hill is at the forefront of an increasingly large social movement: free culture and free software. The movement, started by Dr. Richard Stallman in the 1980s, outlines four freedoms that users should have: freedom to use the work, freedom to study the work, freedom to redistribute and share the work, freedom to make changes and improvements, and then share those improvements.

The four freedoms ensure that users have the ability to take control, rather than being held at the whims of corporations. The goal of the free culture and free software movement is to replace proprietary works with ones that give users more freedom. And some parts of the free culture and free software movement have been incredibly successful like Wikipedia or the Linux operating system, while others are incredibly obscure and never get off the ground.

Mako, as he is better known online, is a Fellow at Stanford's Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and researches these online communities. He started in a diverse set of online communities before finding his place in academia. A self-described technophile, Mako began experimenting with the Linux operating system in middle school and soon found Dr. Richard Stallman's GNU Manifesto, in which the Four Freedoms were first outlined.

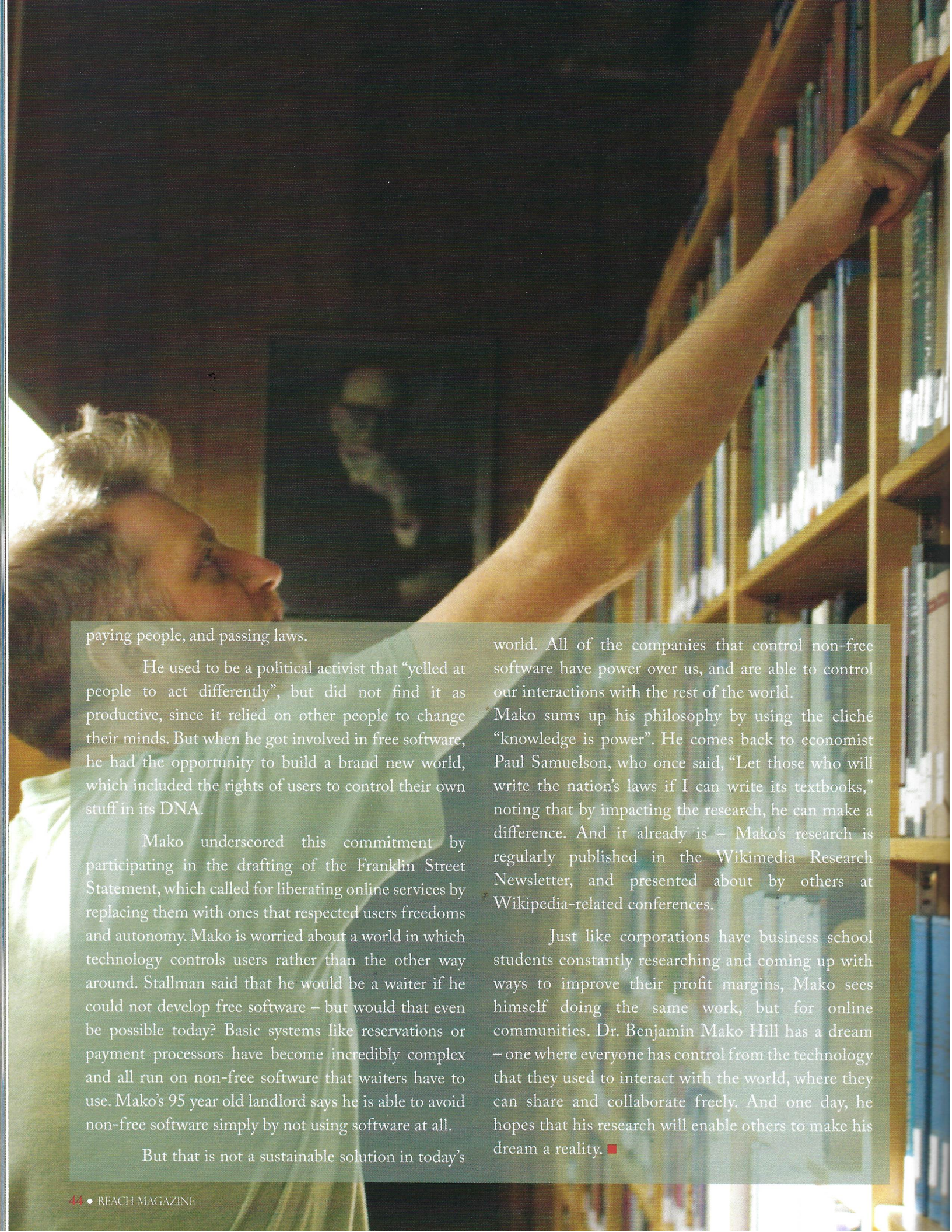This resonated with Mako, and he started contributing to free software in a more systematic way. He participated in many online communities, like Wikipedia and Ubuntu. Mako began talking to social scientists about why some projects that benefited the commons were successful, but many were not.

"I didn't really understand what was going on, but I became convinced that there were real opportunities to study this, and I had a curiosity and desire to understand patterns," Mako said. Leaving behind a promising career in free software, he pivoted to academia, and began to research the aspects of why some online peer production communities were so successful. Expecting to discover a simple five-step checklist on how to build a successful free

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paying people, and passing laws.

He used to be a political activist that "yelled at people to act differently", but did not find it as productive, since it relied on other people to change their minds. But when he got involved in free software, he had the opportunity to build a brand new world, which included the rights of users to control their own stuff in its DNA.

Mako underscored this commitment by participating in the drafting of the Franklin Street Statement, which called for liberating online services by replacing them with ones that respected users freedoms and autonomy. Mako is worried about a world in which technology controls users rather than the other way around. Stallman said that he would be a waiter if he could not develop free software – but would that even be possible today? Basic systems like reservations or payment processors have become incredibly complex and all run on non-free software that waiters have to use. Mako's 95 year old landlord says he is able to avoid non-free software simply by not using software at all.

But that is not a sustainable solution in today's world. All of the companies that control non-free software have power over us, and are able to control our interactions with the rest of the world.

Mako sums up his philosophy by using the cliché "knowledge is power". He comes back to economist Paul Samuelson, who once said, "Let those who will write the nation's laws if I can write its textbooks," noting that by impacting the research, he can make a difference. And it already is – Mako's research is regularly published in the Wikimedia Research Newsletter, and presented about by others at Wikipedia-related conferences.

Just like corporations have business school students constantly researching and coming up with ways to improve their profit margins, Mako sees himself doing the same work, but for online communities. Dr. Benjamin Mako Hill has a dream – one where everyone has control from the technology that they used to interact with the world, where they can share and collaborate freely. And one day, he hopes that his research will enable others to make his dream a reality. ■

software project, Mako explains that he found there are tradeoffs everywhere. Some projects attract more people, but suffer from lower quality as a result. Others might end up with more centralized control, an attribute that Mako would rather avoid.

Until recently, some academics had a feeling that Wikipedia is an unexpected success, that in theory should not work, but somehow does in practice. There is no reason why strangers on the Internet would come together to build the greatest knowledge database ever known, for no monetary gain. But Mako, after studying these kinds of peer production communities for years, has an explanation: "The contribution method is new and novel, but the goal is unoriginal," he said. "Everyone is on the same page if there is a known goal." In the case of Wikipedia, everyone knew that they were building an encyclopedia. Even though there are hundreds of rules, contributors of Wikipedia are expected to follow, they can all be summed up as the policies that go into writing an encyclopedia. Mako notes that this pattern of an unoriginal goal is common in other successful projects like GNU, which was exactly a copy of the Unix operating system.

Mako describes his switch to academia as a huge risk – he had just become a board member of Stallman's Free Software Foundation, and was one of the Ubuntu operating system's core developers. He would be leaving a guaranteed software engineering career for a large unknown in academia. But he believes that he can make a larger impact by studying peer production projects, and that his research can push the needle for all of them. But Mako wants his power to come from influence and impact, rather than strategies that corporations use like coercion,